

Oral History Newark Library

Interviewee: Amiri Baraka

Interviewer: Robert Curvin

Date: May 11, 2009

Location: Newark Public Library

Robert Curvin: So, I want to begin by asking you a little background about you know, growing up in Newark and what Newark was like. So you were, you were- you're a native son, right?

Amiri Baraka: Yeah.

Robert Curvin: Yeah.

Amiri Baraka: I was born here.

Robert Curvin: About the same time, I was, '34.

Amiri Baraka: '34.

Robert Curvin: What month?

Amiri Baraka: Yeah, I was born here in Newark- was born at Community Hospital, which you know, is a black hospital, hospital-

Robert Curvin: Black hospital.

Amiri Baraka: Yeah. And- and then later, my mother became the administrator over there. That's where I worked. When I was in college, I used to work there. In that garage, separating dad potatoes from good potatoes, that was my gig. I had a job as an orderly, which was really disgusting job, you know, when they cut people and take stuff out of them. I had to take the little jars with the stuff. So, you know, that's, you know, my father was a postman. There's a mailman. I mean, lady got to be a, you know, move from just delivering the mail to Lee was actually a supervisor, something. My mother was a social worker. She worked in, Haze[?] homes. She was the social worker at the projects, you know, all the time. And they came here in the 20s, my family, my mother- my mother and her family from Alabama, where they had run my grandfather out. You know, he had a really small store on- they burn a store down. He put it out there another one, they burned that down, put together a funeral parlor, they threatened him. So they moved from there to Pennsylvania to Beaver Falls, and from there Newark. So that's our story in terms of my mother was- went to Tuskegee, and Fisk but dropped out later, because of me, I think. My father came from South Carolina, those were South Carolina people down to Charleston, Columbia, Hartsville. And he came up, you know, rather hurriedly from that area, you know, so they met

here, you know, and got married here. So I've been here all my life, except for when I went away to school. And then I got kicked out of school, Howard. And when I joined the Air Force, and I got kicked out of the air force. [Chuckling] So I was doing good. And then I came back here. When I came back home, we lived right down the street, at Hillside Place, no Hillside Avenue, 119 Hillside Avenue. Before that, we lived on Belmont Avenue, then we lived on Hillside Avenue. And I discovered- it's interesting. There's a book in there that shows you that when the boys used to come to New York, he lived on Belmont Avenue in a house down, you know, about this part where Belmont everywhere white people that there was a couple of blacks in that. So we were raised in the Central Ward, you know, first we were raised in the West Ward at High Street, Newark Street, right around the corner where Dionne Warwick and New Hope Baptist Church right around the corner of Central Avenue School. And I went to McKinley. Then we moved to Belmont Avenue, Belmont and Spruce. And then I had to go- I didn't have to, but I went from Belmont and Spruce to Barringer for three years. And I went to Barringer with the Phipps', the Phipps family. You know a lot of people that we know but there was a big musical family there, Allen Polite [?], you know.

And then like I said, I went away to college and then I went to the Air Force, and I came back here for about a month. And then I moved to New York. And I stayed in New York until the last day of 1965, you know, because I lived down the village until Malcolm X was murdered in February of 65. Then I moved to Harlem. Lived in Harlem, February to December and I left the last day came here back to Newark, back home. Interesting thing is the whole time I lived in New York I had a map of Newark on my desk, you know, so I mean, it was some kind of influence, but I moved back here. And this is where I got married again, I was married in New York, got divorced when I come here, I married my present wife Amina here in Newark, we lived on- at the spirit house, we call it over on- you know, right down near High Street, Sterling Street- High Street- Street that none of that exists-

Robert Curvin:

Today.

Amiri Baraka:

Today. You know- and even the building- the building where spirit house is, that's long gone. But even the building where we had the first committee for Unified Newark doesn't exist, which was right next to St. Benedict's. It doesn't exist anymore.

Robert Curvin:

When you came back at the end of 65, did you have in mind at that time that you would be mobilizing a political movement in the city?

Amiri Baraka:

Well, not- actually, I was too new back in the city to understand- I moved by city, it took me a while to understand that the one black few would have

majority. And number two, that they could be registered, you know, where they would have been majority. And, you know, three, there was a reason to do that, you know. So [unclear] that's the kind of political position of blacks in Newark, you know. But what I did soon after, at the spirit house, we call it 33 Sterling Street, we began to do the same thing that we were doing at heart. When I was in Harlem, I had a place called the Black Arts, Repertory Theater, we used to do theater there. And poetry readings and, you know, concerts, and then we moved that stuff into the street, we put out- sent out four trucks, we were the first real anti-poverty program in the Harlem that was on Clayton Palace[?] through Livingston, Wingate. You know, we were the first- the first large program in Harlem.

The problem was that there was too much infighting in the program, because Black was not an ideology, we soon found out. And so there was black Muslims and black nationalists and black communists, and black fools all hooked up in there, you know. So that came to an end, the end of 65. And the day after I moved back to New York City, that's what it was. So, the spirit house was a continuation of that. We chopped down the first floor and began to get plays in their concerts, poetry readings, and then you start focusing on the youth in the community.

You know, that's really how it evolved. I wanted to teach them I taught them how to use you know, the typewriters, and the mimeograph machines and electronic magnetic machines. That was before faxes- before e-mail.

Robert Curvin:

Right.

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah. And then it came to my attention that the kids couldn't read, because we were trying to teach them to do these plays, I wrote plays for them to do. I wrote a play called Board of Education that they were supposed to do with the Board of Education. But they couldn't read. See. So then, since a lot of them went to then Robert Tree, we started to go up to Robert Tree, took an activist role in that and finally, that's how Jean Campbell got the job of this principal because we were harassing MC. And we put out a newsletter done in the neighborhood and one of the first things we asked was [unclear] black Mayor that's- that's probably 1966 we start putting that up. We start putting out the stuff by black power. I guess Carmichael about that time came out with the 67-68. Anyway, came out with this thing about black power. We started replicating that on the buildings in New York, you know, a kind of stencil says black power with a fist. And 67, the rebellion. I had just left you in front of the precinct, the demonstration and I walked back to Sterling Street from that demonstration, by the time I got back to Stokes, and I was sitting on the porch, people come around, around the corner. So, they're breaking windows, they're breaking windows.

Robert Curvin: This was the first night.

Amiri Baraka: The first night. And so I jumped in my head, a brand new Volkswagen bus. Me and a couple of guys jumped on this bus. Because, you know, essentially what we want to do is look and see, you know, but we got caught in that holes. You know, the police was spinning around, the people were running, we were driving around trying to see. In the middle of that I took a guy to the hospital, who shot in the ankle, at the corner of Belmont and Spruce, this guy was sitting out- sitting on the curb trying to take this liquor from a store and shot him in the ankle, foot out there in the curb. So, we picked him up and took him to the hospital- was like a madhouse. We stayed up too late. So, by one o'clock in the morning, streets were clear, but we will come in dropping people off. Because it was three of us and a drummer who got an name- drummer- Tom Perry. So, we were coming across Seventh Street. And when we got to Seventh in South Orange just before I saw these red lights was the police.

We got to the corner there, they jumped us, pulled us out of the car and start beating us. I mean, I mean it's- I have, I have a scar here that I- you know will have all my life and this gut just hit me in the head with [unclear] the barrel of his gun. But the irony is that I had gone to high school with this guy. And when he opened the door, I said I know you I went to Barringer- smacked me across the head. And these cops start beating me. I mean, I would have died right there if it wasn't for the people throwing stuff out of the windows. They beat- they really beat me, you know it was with a stick. And after a while you can't really feel it. You feel the impact. But you know, it's not the same thing. And I remember this guy was telling me, he was beating me- yes, I'm the devil. I'm the devil. [chuckle]

You know, turn it all that Muslim stuff around. But the funny thing about that after they beat me, you know, the people stopped it because I was bleeding all over the place and then they put me in the police cars, bleeding all over the city took me out. The people were throwing stuff out the windows right there in the corner, Seventh Street and South Orange Avenue. When they finally took me down, they didn't take me to the hospital. They, they took me to police headquarters to Spina's office.

Robert Curvin: And they knew who you were?

Amiri Baraka: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, this is, you know, the guy says- Spina said- he's sitting there. It's like a movie- he says, well, we got you. You know, some kinds of like Jimmy Cagney movies. And I said well, I ain't dead, you know, so they took me from there to the hospital, city hospital. They chained me to this wheelchair- there's a great picture of me changed in a wheelchair. And nobody knew where I was, you know, my wife was looking

for me, you know. Because when they had indicted me, I'm Everett L. Jones. You know, I give the name Everdale Jones Labor. So, they couldn't find me really. So finally, the way she found me is- wow. She looked at my address book and saw the names of people I added in there and one of them was Allen Ginsberg, who was a friend of mine. She called Allen and said, you know, they got him in there, I don't know where he is, blah, blah, blah.

Allen Ginsberg called Jean Paul Sartre in Paris. And Sartre called the police station. I'll get to that. He called a police station. [chuckle] And so when that happened, you know, white people- famous white people interested in it. Then suddenly I was found, and she came running up there.

She came running up there to the hospital. And I was, you know, chained in the wheelchair. And a black cop told her, you better get out here they'll kill you, you know. As a matter of fact one of the doctors said, You're the poet right? I'm sitting here my head mashed open- said you're the poet. I said yeah, he said well you'll never write any more poetry, and begins to stitch up my head but no, you know, painkiller. Just [sounds] so I mean, those were like war days. I mean, I looked at that as war because Newark those days, as you well know, was a very rough place. You know, one time a cop runs up in the loft down there at Shipman Street where they had the place called loft in music in the cellar where they had music. I'm rehearsing- it takes a script out of my head. It's one time we've been having poetry up near the station, a cop on the corner of High Street, just before you get to Shipman Street. You know, right there, we're St. Benedict stays now.

Defied us to have the poetry reading, you know, he said, Well, wait, what [unclear] you know, but anyway, that's what- those were the rough days, you know, they used to ride up and down Stirling Street and call our women names, you know, real, crazy stuff. But that whole period until Gibson got elected, which is one of the reasons that I was, so you know, determined that that happened, those- our lives were in danger. See, and I think a lot of people don't realize that when they started talking about the theses and thats of that, you know, what did it accomplish, so forth. The first thing it did, it saved our lives. So that was, that was the big thing right there. Because we were right up against that every day. You know, I got arrested three, four times. You know, one time in the bank, I'm getting ready to make a deposit. Had my man with me. Guy comes in, I can't think of that officer's name. Anyway, he makes a remark I just saw your brother Imperioli, you know, Imperioli is your brother, hey, my brother, you know. And so, the guy- the cop, he's got a shot gun. That's when they were making these bank stops.

So, this young fella that was with me, no, I said to the cop- I said you know, the problem is you got your, your whatnot in your hand, that's your that's really your sexual instrument in your hands. You know, that's your problem.

So then he gets wild, the guy takes the gun away from- I mean. And so, they call the whole troop and took us down to prison. That guy was found murdered to that young boy that did that. He was murdered in East Orange. Now, there was a lot of wild stuff happening therein. But anyway, I say that that period, up until 1970 When Gibson was finally elected, and we did a lot of stuff, you know, that was a very, very innovative kind of campaign. You know, I- at the time, it was easy to get people because we had everybody coming here. Cosby gave us billboards with his picture on it pointing-pointing to Gibson in them, you know. I mean, everybody you can name Isaac Hayes, the Supremes, Stevie Wonder rode around in the truck all day in a bright yellow suit. I remember- [chuckling/ laughter]

Robert Curvin:

What about the convention?

Amiri Baraka:

Oh, yeah. 60 or 69? We had a black in the early 70s. Yes. 68 and 69. We had the black and Puerto Rican convention. Yeah. And that was a, that was a good move. Because I guess that was the first time we had gotten people mobilized already what to do, you know, before the thing went down. So. And all that stuff, I think took a [unclear] in them by surprise. They never thought to see that kind of conventional-

Rober Curvin:

Organization.

Amiri Baraka:

Right. That was a thing that shocked them, and they didn't know how to really respond to that, you know, because for the first time, the majority, which I think they tend to downplay, because the passivity for the first time the majority asserted itself, you see, and it asserted itself. I mean, there was nothing they could do. It was- those were very positive, very hard times though, you know, because if you ask the people in our organization, each committee for Unified Newark [unclear] 90 Brothers was all these people was interested in running for office, you know, that was Ken Gibson, Harry Wheeler, all those people that we worked at that nonstop, you know, for those few years. And so from the time of the rebellion 67, then 68, 69, 70, we were working around the clock on. And then the 70, we had formed a congress of African people, which is all these communities for Unified Newark- organizations throughout the country was like 15 different cities, you know, and that was important, because what it did is mobilize black folks politically, in these different cities that looked at Newark as a sort of flagship at the time, you know-

Robert Curvin:

Was it your vision that you could duplicate or replicate what had happened in New York?

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah, that's, that's what- we- that's what I thought. I thought that we could do that in those cities. They were the biggest cities. I mean, we were in some small cities. We were in the big cities, just like most of the black population

lives in these huge cities, you know, but that's what the Gary Convention was that we would call. You know, again, it took a lot of work a lot of Gorman [?], back and forth, [unclear] in Chicago, you know, with those people that DC with the congressman, traveling around different places.

And that's what that was supposed to do to actually energize the entire black population in a political way, you know, to-to let us see, you know, collectively how much power that we have, you know, that, and that, I think, was the real beginning of such a thing as the Black Caucus where they really could see, you know, that self-reflective kind of thing. The problem was, of course, when, after the Gary Convention, by the time the Democratic Convention started, a lot of the political- the elected officials then began to sell themselves out trade in different ways. So that-

Robert Curvin: What were your expect- expectations of Gibson after [unclear]?

Amiri Baraka: Well, let's see, I had a completely idealistic view of it. I mean, like, for instance, WBGO, that was my idea. I said, we need you know, 24-hour art station, we could take that station over cable television, and so we could get the cable television and we could teach Black History directly in the classroom, you know, stuff like that. I had never dreamed then that Gibson would have some kind of objection to that. Why he would- but he did. The Biggio thing, he made it impossible for us and sold it to a white group in the suburbs, who owns it till this day. The cable television even though we put together a great board for that. Gil Mobile was wanting to people on our board, Tony Brown was another person on the board, you know. Gibson stopped that, straight out. Now Junius Williams was head of Model Cities. And he says that Gibson stopped him from doing it, that Gibson refused. He said, we don't want this to be privately owned. You don't want to be private you know. What are you talking about, what do you think, this a socialist city or something?

But they not only stopped us. They arrested the guy who was head of Cablevision nationally, who had given us a channel. We've given us two channels. One to put right into the schools and one for advertising and stuff. They arrested him- canceled Cablevision for two years. Put the Governor of Pennsylvania in charge of it. And then once that period of- two-year period had passed, then gave the ownership or control of it to a black group who are still around somewhere. I know Bundy was part of that Al Bundy was part of-

Robert Curvin: [Unclear] Washington.

Amiri Baraka: Yeah, those folks Yeah. Who after Couple years gave it back to Prudential.

Robert Curvin: Right.

Amiri Baraka: So-

Robert Curvin: they fall down there? [?]

Amiri Baraka: I don't know. I don't know that. It was all kind of rumors. I don't know. I know. But the point was to keep it away from us who were communications people, you know, who knew what to do with it. See, that was the point. They knew that I knew what to do with it. And the people that we had I mean, you know, you're talking about big time communications people Gil Mobile man, still the most watched television program among African Americans, you know. So those were two of the things- and like a couple of months after Gibson got in there, he runs people against our people. It's because at the time we had a big position in anti-poverty, you know, UCC [United Community Corporation]- he runs people against those. And I was shocked at first, you know, that he had done that, you know, and I'm shocked and really disappointed but earlier, you know, the guy that I considered my, my advisor, my consigliere, Russell Bingham, Baba is calling Baba Michael is my man. He comes to me says, you know, Prudential already bought that guy talking about Kenneth Gibson. So, you really want that guy says What do you mean? He said- because he was a retired member of the Cosa Nostra the black people that used to run the numbers, which is why- and he still went up there to talk to those guys.

Robert Curvin: He talked about Bingham.

Amiri Baraka: Yeah. And he said they already bought guy. And the runoff hadn't happened yet. That is after the first thing when we- when Addonizio got whipped up first time and we had a run off. This is- they already bought him. It should- I heard this from- what, I can't think of the guy's name up there from- Richie the Boot Boiardo, he says, he says he told me that he already bought them. You know, they got him. And so, I was so furious. I haven't done all that work, said goddamnit I'll kill that son of a bitch, I'll kill him. And Baba says to me, what do you want to give them a twofer? [chuckle]

I thought that was the greatest wisdom at the time. So do you want- you want to give him a twofer countdown, you know. So, you know, I knew from that point on that we were like, being played like the kids say, you know what I mean? I suddenly I'd have appointments to see him you know, after we had I mean literally laid down- I mean, that whole campaign the whole stream of whether it was Adam Clayton Powell or you know the opera singer or Julian Bond all those people man we have done that brought all those people in you know, and I mean you know and

Robert Curvin: Did you raise money for him during [unclear]?

Amiri Baraka: Sure. And, and, and Addonizio could not- they could not face that. You know, we even got white movie stars to come in, you know-

Robert Curvin: Dustin Hoffman.

Amiri Baraka: Dustin Hoffman, you know what I mean? I gotta- and there was no way they could, could defeat that because it was just too much.

Robert Curvin: Given, given that you already knew pretty much once the inauguration took place that if Baba was right, that he was already in the grips of other folks you still went ahead with [unclear] to thinking that he was gonna support-

Amiri Baraka: Well, we thought that he had no choice [unclear] he was wrong again because he didn't, and the point was that Les Brown and I had skull that out- we bribed Imperioli from the very beginning. We said you know hey, you want workers there? You got them whatever you want you got it because you know good and well the idea of no high rise in this is absurd. Matter of fact I need time to show you how low they were. Took a picture from a high rise in the North Ward down to the ground showing that there were no high rises. So, I purely was cool. It was Steve Adubato. And I just talked to Steve a month ago about that, you know, so- well, he's asked me why couldn't we have never been friends? I said we're going to pull them. You know. Steve is too much- he says to me, you don't trust me. I said no, I know you that's even better. [laughter] But he- that whole business I-

Robert Curvin: You think it was Steve that did the

Amiri Baraka: Oh, absolutely. It was it was Steve. Imperioli didn't know it. Imperioli was like for all of his menace as, as, as an ugly face. Politically, he was like, you know, one of these guys on the football field he didn't run around, and it wasn't much, you know. Plus, we had put the fear of God in Imperioli some other ways. You know, as far as his great karate his karate skills and everything I had a guy with me, Fodizi [?], who was our sensei, you know, because all those builders knew karate, That was our thing at the time, you know, that was one time we're walking across to the, to the, to the courthouse to do something. He's walking by my side and who's coming down at the walk- the other way, told me Imperioli. And Fodizi[?], he wheels around in front of me and others, he's here, he turns around, so that he's facing me and he continues to turn and he bends down. And he sticks his hand between Tony and Imperioli's legs and said what's happening and told me.

So, I mean, from then on, it was like, you know, don't even try that karate stuff. You'll not survive it; you know you won't survive it. But that was that period, I had just had to adjust to that the fact that that we still were going to be in a kind of a position where adversarial position with the city

government, you know, and I certainly hadn't counted on that. I thought that the ideas that we had, and that we had showed by being you know, the successful thing that I don't think Gibson could have done by himself. I thought that we should be rewarded some kind of way, you know, with some kind of access and not in any kind of illegal way. I mean, the thing for WB Joe, that thing for the, for the cable television world, world- well worked out. You know, I mean, there's- there were hours and hours of work put into those proposals. And we knew- I knew these people, these various people, you know, it wasn't like it. You know, you just mumbling in the dark. But-

Robert Curvin: I remember going to some of the meetings with the people from Fairleigh Dickinson-

Amiri Baraka: Yeah.

Robert Curvin: -we wanted to support your efforts.

Amiri Baraka: Well, there you go. That's right. As a matter of fact, we tried to buy that place on the corner that I made a mistake. Because the rabbi that was running that there, the rabbi who was with Dr. King Mark was Dr. King. They moved that place up in Livingston somewhere. But anyway, he asked me what I thought about Israel rally and-

Robert Curvin: [unclear] Rabbi Prince.

Amiri Baraka: Rabbi Prince, right. He asked me what I thought about this, and I said it shouldn't be, you know, Democratic Republic, like he said, that will be the in Israel. And I didn't realize that how deeply that because it was a casual comment, you know, just casually said casually remarked wasn't on any kind of ideological fear. It was just what I said, should be democratic republic, you know. But that was that for that, that that was the end of that project, because we thought, given what we had down on High Street, that that was ideal, because they had a dining room or pool- auditorium in there, you know, it still do. But that whole thing unraveled with Gibson that we found ourselves in an adversary position, and we had to deal with it-

Robert Curvin: Now later most of you developed a larger development project, actually, under Model Cities for the Central Ward. And what happened with that?

Amiri Baraka: R-32. was called, as a matter of fact, the brother who was running that for us, Komizi Woodard, is a professor at Sarah Lawrence. And he wrote a book called Nation Within a Nation, right. So, see, I mean, to show you that those young people there, they were not just some Wow, well, he had militants, these were like, you know, kids with a great deal of intelligence and some skills this boy had dropped out of college. He later went back, but during that period, a lot of people when it was Stokely Carmichael, Komizi

would have dropped out of school to do what they thought would advance Afro-American people. And so yeah, that just- we had a model, we did a model for the whole city, you know, we for that whole R-32 period, which is really, from, I guess it's a, all that stuff you see from 18th, all the way across from West Kenny, all of those buildings, all the way across to Avon Avenue, that whole- that was the project. And we put it together- again, the corruption.

The guy who was running the Housing Authority, then who was the nephew of Richie Boiardo, [chuckle] told me, he says, if you want to build this, you have to have the people that we named as the builders. And all of the technicians, you have to get from us. And so again, you see compromises for politicians, actually, and they do it. Some do it well, some don't do it. You know, we've seen what Obama's gonna do with it. But my idea was, was too radical. I mean, I wasn't willing to compromise, you see, and that was a problem, you see, because you cannot make it in this society, unless you compromise on certain levels. So I said, No, I'm not gonna do that. Why should I do that? I'm out here talking about black, you know, power, black workers, like this. And you told me, I gotta hire white people to do all this? I'm not gonna do that, you said was over- conversation over. And that was the end of R-32. No, because that that- and all these things, whether we want to build our towers, they spent a million dollars to dig a hole, and then \$2 million to cover the hole up.

Is a certain level, that even an organization like ours, which, you know, because we actually essentially will reform us, I guess, we were not willing to live set fire and stuff and blow up stuff, you know, you're gonna meet a level where you're gonna have to, you're gonna have to extend what you're doing to another level. The idea of the electrode thing, and having taken that over, I can see where they might even say, Well, you know, he's always well let them have that they're working on it. But to control those essential institutions, they were not willing to give that up. In WB Joe and Cable Television, obviously- I had figured that out, right, those two things in the correct hands will be enormously you know, and, and they knew that as well as I know that. But to show you how, how high is the regard and who Gibson was probably fronting for, to lock up the head of the Cable Television. The National Cable Television Company, lock him up for corruption. And put that whole New Jersey Cablevision to cancel that for two years, with no activity went on, to put the Governor of Pennsylvania and charge it up. And then to fool around until they got some deserving group. But what was in their mind always was to stop them- stop those people there. You know, it's clear.

Robert Curvin: You think back? Given what you know, today, would you do it any differently?

Amiri Baraka: Probably, I would, in some ways, I don't know which ways I would find ways not to, to make everything that adversarial. I would try to compromise in some ways, perhaps ways that I could figure out but see what took us off is that we were dealing with black people now. See, that's what took me off the white people. That idea you know, fu bla, bla bla, I can, I can handle that. That wasn't going on with the chin. But when, when you got the black people, these Negroes that we had put into power. See, that was the thing that threw me off, you see, because- and I told him once I even told [unclear] James that once you see the problem with you, is that we're not doing the same thing we did to those white people. If we ran in your office and start throwing things around and stuff like that, but we treating you like a family member, which in this sense, is naive because it was a class struggle. It was an adversarial class struggle. You know, I mean Sharpe when Sharpe getting in there, we did the same thing but Sharpe when he got in- he had a cultural committee he didn't put me on its arts and culture and to go and complain then- what is this? You mean to tell me of all those people? Why am I suddenly like our scapegoat on all this what did, what did I do?

I mean, everything I've done shows that I was supported you.

Robert Curvin: [unclear]

Amiri Baraka: And I told- I said Sharpe, you know, I don't want to be the Mayor. You know, that's what you think, you know what I mean? But that kind of stuff was was surprising and hurtful in a lot of ways. I didn't- you know-

Robert Curvin: What about Sharpe's in comparison to Gibson is?

Amiri Baraka: Sharpe, Sharpe, Sharpe was a bit elite, and he was very- Sharpe did a lot of very positive things that will be you know, like Shakespeare said, will be interred with their bones. You'll never find out what those things were, like all his housing and stuff and all this stuff. This is Sharpe's doing. But the problem with Sharpe of course, is the last vote was an anti-Sharpe vote, the vote that put, you know, Booker in. And I'd like to add a note on Booker, while you making this. In 1968 when get- when Dr. King came to Newark, with the Poor People's Campaign, he came to my house, Stirling Street, see, and I looked out the window, I saw these cops, airplane, you know, helicopters, people in the rooms, people walking in both sides. So, they come in and bust us, they coming in and bust us, you know, knock on the door to buildings open the door, it is Martin Luther King standing on steps. And so for that second, I'm standing [unclear] you know, and they took photographs. Now that photograph had been in the lobby of City Hall ever

since the, the current layer as we moved it. And, and the- it was a reporter from the New York Times who called me to tell me about that. That photo that was down there, it's gone. You know, and I was just thinking about this morning, I was thinking I'm gonna raise that in some kind of way.

I'm trying to figure out how to raise that. But, I mean, that's so petty, you know, what, what would plus not only is it petty it's a violation of Afro-American history, you cannot erase stuff like that, just because you have the power to do that. You just take that out of existence, you know, but that's, that's precisely what he did. You know. And then, I mean, it just shows you that kind of devolution from Home Rule such as it was to what exists now. But no Sharpe was infinitely greater Mayor than Gibson, Gibson you know, to say this really Gibson is benevolently as I said, Gibson was in there, because he was the first black dude in, the first black man. And we expected much more than he could even conceive in doing. You see, and that's, that puts you in a spot if you if you are there, and you have only so much capacity to do whatever to do whatever. And part of it you don't even understand. You see, which, which I say as benevolently as I can. It's the problem. I mean, you need to tell me you think that ultimately, it is better that there will be jazz or WB Joe's in those people's hands. You think ultimately, it's better that the cable television is in those people's hands based on what what have they done for black people? You know, rather than the people actually struggle even to give power to you, see, and that's hard to see if you look at that just objectively it's it's crazy. And that's exactly what happened.

Robert Curvin: What do you think the city's gonna [unclear]?

Amiri Baraka: Excuse me?

Robert Curvin: Where do you think the city is heading? And what is your view about this quote, Renaissance, that's happening?

Amiri Baraka: Well, it's- it's outer directed it's- it's directed to- to actually seduce a middle management to live in Newark. With the- with- with the additional idea that it has to run a great many of the indigenous out here. I mean, those two houses on the corner this street well in the last year here, 1, 2, 3, 4 families have moved that were here a long time. Does too. Yeah, black, there's no no black people around here, the two and a quarter are over \$300,000 apiece, those two buildings, two houses that they just built. They just built that last year. Now, the idea of somebody paying 300,000 I was living in New York would be absurd during the time we're talking about that would be an absurdity. People ask us about this house. And so we paid \$25,000 for this house, although the, you know, the math by the time yeah, 30 year mortgage, you know, it was enormous. It cost me more to get rid of the

mortgage at the end, than I paid down payment. You understand? So yet, the idea of a \$25,000 house in today's market is absurd. I mean, there's nothing you could do with 25,000 sitting someplace. And then it will be over in a minute. That's- so this woman who is now as opposed to a booker is paying, what, \$3,500 a month for this apartment that she got down, you know what I mean? Things but just shows you, you know, things, I believe that they are trying to make this a little pseudo suburban spot for middle management. That's what they're trying to do. You know,

Robert Curvin: You think that is a realistic or even a feasible plan? I just don't see poor black people, particularly in the cities still has a very substantial plan.

Amiri Baraka: [chuckling] I'm just saying that's their plan. I don't I don't-

Robert Curvin: It can't happen.

Amiri Baraka: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. But it's going to put a lot of pain out here. A lot of pain out here. But I don't think they can do that. You know, but that's the intention. We having a conference the 16th of this month at Symphony Hall about saving Symphony Hall. But the people they have addressing this conference, which is Larry Goldman. Price, and some reporter from the ledger. I don't know what interest they would have been doing that in the first place. You know, I've met with Goldman, five hours before there was an NJ PAC here. My wife served him dinner, we talked, we talked, we talked, we talked all night, you know, to try to get him to understand that even though they were building that thing for him, that the most noble and productive thing he could do was let Symphony Hall developed independently for the community without trying to stifle it.

He never understood that. His last words leaving this house well, I don't want to start apartheid. I said, Larry, apartheid is when you have something, and we don't. There can be more than one theater in Newark, you ever heard of Broadway. I mean, it's just a bizarre thing that some suburban kind of force can come in and set up essentially a one theater one arena, not one theater, one arena, but for sure, that's good. Get everybody you can but to stop the development of indigenous smaller projects? That's not correct. It's not correct. So, we're gonna fight that out to 16th. Larry Goldman net used to meet with us regularly, but we had to Lincoln Park- you know, Lincoln Park Coast development, which we still have which we've already built six, seven houses. We have 11 acres, and we done build a museum, Afro-American music there. He met with us over a year until he found out what we're gonna do. Then he dropped out. There was no such thing as a downtown cultural district.

The fact that we were putting a Lincoln Park Coast cultural district were the basis for his whole thing. You know, I think at least the idea of the Newark

New Jersey store were artifacts of all the great people the past who here would be sold, you know, they never did that. They put it online. That was what we were gonna do. Anyway, that's what I say when we say the Home Rule is over. One of the reasons that rise has been so that we can reestablish some kind of policies that benefit the people of this city, you know, and not just people who you know, as a bedroom community for New York, but as a real, a whole developing place. And so that's, that's, that's, I think the struggles that are gonna go [unclear].

Robert Curvin: How do we recapture that kind of interest commitment to organization that we experienced in the 1960s?

Amiri Baraka: Well, we had a meeting. We had a meeting last week in Philly. To evaluate Obama's first 100 days, we got a, thirty-day, sixty-day, ninety-day report back to set up a national organization much like the Gary Convention was supposed to be set up, we'll see. Let's see what- what- what is our problem is sectarianism that a lot of us are not willing to, to come together and meet with people who we don't want to agree with ideologically, totally. Back in the day, we do that, because our thing was, you know, black folks, you know, what they were whatever they thought, and then we became too ideologically pure. And that was one of the reasons that the things split up, you know, just when I became a Marxist, that kind of ground, that kind of neophyte need to correct everybody, rather than see that beyond your own ideological commitment, there's a commitment to a united front. And that's what we still have to get together.

Robert Curvin: Do you think that's changed from your own perspective?

From my perspective, it has all of the people on the left, I was the leading person for Barack Obama, I went around this country debating people debating leftists, communists, anarchists, nationalists. Incredible. I was at one meeting, these people are asking me because they want Cynthia McKinney said, I love Cindy McCain, you know, I love it, she came in and she ain't gonna be the president. You know, and that's one of the things I got from reading this book that confirmed that, in my mind, the Radical Republican that even though Douglas was closer to the Free-Soil Party, and the other pure, anti-slave party, he chose to support the Republicans. Why? Because they can get elected. And they had a anti-slavery plank, even though a lot of stuff he didn't agree with, still, they could get elected you see. And it's hard to swallow that sometimes if you got some ideological you know, clarity you think part of that clarity has to be how do you organize people? You see, you cannot be just so ideologically pure that keep by yourself, you know, which is what the radicals in the left tend to do. So that's at this point. Well, we have to do especially under the umbrella of a black president who I am much in support of still I mean, my support for

Obama has not weakened at all because see, number one we have done this Dan, he's the president united states not he's not running for the NAACP, you know, or any of that stuff.

So, we have to temper what we want, what he has to deal with. And I think that economic situation which you know, I've got a newspaper ad that we passed out these even [unclear] at inauguration.

Those people haven't gone anywhere or mean they've done right wing scourge you right up the street. I mean, you know, [unclear] on television every other night with his foolishness, you know? Biggest of those networks are furiously anti Obama you know, Murdoch and Fox News and that cartoon that he had you know, I mean, man- control- me- he- first of all, he's breaking the law. I mean, Murdoch, he's- there was supposed to be a limit to how much you can clearly, you know, control. Media is supposed to have- either print media or electric media, you can have both. He's got all of this stuff. And then I urge the Newark City Council to pass through to its it's president, we sat in a meeting with a group of people at the mansion, not the mansion, Culture Center. Women supported me in May and March [?]. And agreed that that cartoon, Murdoch should be arrested for that corruption, you cannot simulate the murder of the President of the United States. That's like, you can't do that. You know, and-

Robert Curvin: Just imagine if the races were reversed.

Amiri Baraka: Oh, God-

Robert Curvin: What would have happened?

Amiri Baraka: They would take them out of there with their hands up. You know, that's, that could never happen. You know. So, it's against those forces, enormously powerful forces that he has. And I think it's irresponsible for some of these black and left people to be screaming about the stuff he's not doing. Rather than support what he is doing. Although pointing out what he needs to do, she is like this. I saw this guy often Maddox, I'm telling you that Obama's disability he ain't do this, he ain't do that. But the things that he has done, he doesn't recognize because he probably hadn't studied that. You know, telling me well, he can deal with us, because he went to Harvard. Geez, so did DuBois. I mean, it's like, you know, these absurd, you know, black nationalists, it ain't this it ain't that. Well, what is it? That's what I wanna know, what is it? If you don't understand what it is opposed to those forces that we just got rid of? No, it's, I don't, I don't understand it. There is no force to support him. But just a whole lot of, you know, just mindless comments.

Robert Curvin: Back to Newark. Do you have any thoughts on what we can do about the schools and the education system?

Amiri Baraka: Well, first, stop giving money away to charter schools. That would be my first thing we gave \$79 million to charter schools, and at the same time, have a deficit for public education budget. Now, what sense does that make? If you want to have a private school? Right on, go ahead, you know, but don't ask public funds to support that we budget. Yeah, we had a school of private I guess, we didn't think of it that way, African Free School that my wife ran, Amina. But she recommended we stopped that. And we did when it meant that we either gonna have to charge tuition or take public funds. We never did that. All that money was from foundations. But then, to expand the school to cover the whole K to Eight. That was another kind of expenditure. And we didn't have that. And what they're doing now is using the charter school legislation, to use money to take money.

In other words, the Money Follows the child, you pull the child out of the school, the Money Follows the child shouldn't be like that. No, no, no, if you want a private education, solid go for it, but not at the detriment of public education. You know, that's my son. So that's number one. Number two, we need some recruitment programs for teachers, that these young people, they're the ones who need to teach in this town, you know, the kids like grads and that whole age group. And beneath them, they're the ones that need to be teaching. And there needs to be a stronger relationship between the education say, the running of the city, you know, all these children should be apprenticed and running the city, part of their education should be running the city, you know, the police department, the fire department, you know, taxes, you know, whatever one you want, that should be their apprentice work, you see, so that they see that what they're doing is not abstract. But it's rooted in in some practical, useful stuff that jobs that they can get. See the whole idea of Booker bringing in these hot shots from the Ivy League and somebody that doesn't impress me at all, you know, it's the people in this town in Newark. Those people who got those degrees, they could get a job anywhere while they used to. But no, you have to prepare the youth of this city to run this city, you see, and you need a recruitment program for these four teachers. And you need education program tied to the running of the city, you need to bring in, of course, arts and culture more, you know, important and to recruit some of those kids to do that, you know, what is that, American Icon, we've been proposing that down Symphony Hall for 30 years, you know, to have actually talent chose and things like that, and actual incremental kinds of recognition of people's development of their skills, whether it's singing or dancing, or poetry, or, you know, painting. But the schools has to be tied to some practical thing, like right now, the only practical thing was thought to is like sports as bizarre as that

seems. I mean, if your guy excels in football, chances are you can get to college on a football scholarship, maybe, you know, you can. But all of it needs to be more practically grounded. And you have to remember that education has got to be at least as interesting as a rap station. You know, I mean, otherwise, why would they come? You know, it just means innovation and innovation, with real information and real ideas.

You know, it's a hard thing, you know, people are coming here as bureaucrats whose only job is to see that certain numbers get mashed, you know, and that they meet this year's, you know, this year's or whatever it is, whatever the call is, for this, whatever the call is that forever the call is to that, but the actual idea of the actual information, you know, I don't even know, how many of those top bureaucrats really appreciate what education is. Because-

Robert Curvin: I went over to see Adubato's place recently. And he's doing it. And I must confess-

Amiri Baraka: Oh, yeah, I seen it.

Robert Curvin: Doing it, he's tied the service educational programs to the political power. And is, in my view, he's the most powerful man in the city at this moment.

Amiri Baraka: Yeah.

Robert Curvin: Which is kind of an entity that-

Amiri Baraka: Controls the central ward.

Robert Curvin: Now people get to central Ward now the south Ward and is apparently made his deal with Booker for next year.

Amiri Baraka: Well, I think he's trying to decide whether he's going to support book or whether he's going to run Ramos, I think he's gonna support Booker this time around, you know,

Robert Curvin: My information tells me that they've sat down and they've cut the deal. And that's what the Oprah money was about to him. And they got it, they put it together.

Amiri Baraka: I would imagine that will be the thing, easiest thing for Steve to do too. And it will be the smartest thing for Booker to do. So, I don't know they told me they're gonna spend all that money and focus it on keeping Raz out of the south Ward, you know, to do while-

Robert Curvin: Get down to the folks in the neighborhood

But see what Booker don't understand. And I can understand like power corrupts it would be better for him to have eyes on that council because

that's one vote you understand you can you can allow that you know, that kind of resistance and still you know, but they don't they don't want that they want everything their way and that's not possible over long periods. You can't have everything you were a long period that's not gonna work. So we're going to see in the next years because I think Ross is the candidate can duck and break down I mean, they're getting ready to privatize the water I mean, by what I mean who who would concede that sticking through Well, we're gonna get so on So amount of money Yeah. But then somebody else owns your water. Don't you understand that?

Robert Curvin: They tried to do that almost 40 years ago, and Gibson actually led the opposition when he was running for Mecca and Addonizio tried to do it. And here we go again.

Amiri Baraka: Here we go again. I want to know, because Booker, whatever he does, but I want to know what are those other folks doing? What is their- you know? I don't know how they'll vote, but I'm talking about Payne Jr. and Rice, Jr. and. And those people, Crump.

Robert Curvin: We gotta get to them.

Amiri Baraka: Yeah, that's true.

[End of Audio]